

# A chipmunk off the old block

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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Valhalla: The Lord of Infinity is one of the more obscure, late titles featured in my 'best Amiga game death sequences' video. In the end, the example I managed to capture wasn't all that spectacular - just me falling down a hole - yet was so hard-fought I felt I had to include it. It's odd because if you read the reviews, a common theme emerges - the game is hampered by the unpredictability and ridiculous regularity of sticky demises. Rick Dangerous of the puzzle-adventure world, they'd have you believe.

"In spite of this initial promise, Valhalla is a pig to play. The basic problem is that virtually all the rooms on each level are filled with unseen traps and even the odd scrap of map cannot save you from frequent inexplicable deaths."

**Amiga Format (23%, July 1994)**

"Also, you die far too regularly in the game; often stepping on a simple paving stone reveals a gaping pit into which you fall to your death. No-one likes to die in a game, especially when there's nothing you can do to prevent it, but to build trial-and-error death into an adventure is just bad design, and means that getting a pen and paper out and mapping parts of the levels is absolutely necessary."

### **The One (81%, June 1994)**

"All this is irrelevant, because after 20 minutes, you will only be aware of one thing, which is the number of times you die. Have you read Kangaroo Court on the news pages yet? Well do so, because it is all about how crap games are made harder by instant and unavoidable death. In this game, if you move onto the wrong floor tile, you die. It does not wobble and give you a second to jump off or anything, you just die. Now in some levels, the danger areas are obviously marked by cracks or hinge lines, but in others the pits are identical to the solid floor, and seeing as many rooms have only a single safe path through, gameplay is reduced to moving, saving the game, moving, falling your death, reloading the saved game, and so on."

### **Amiga Power (19%, July 1994)**

In contrast, it took me about fifteen minutes to find a scenario that would enable me to commit suicide. That was my *only* goal, unambitious as it was. Perhaps the first level eases you in, then the difficulty curve suddenly ramps up, who knows?

I didn't stick with it long enough to find out. It's an intriguing, though certainly not addictive or enthralling game in my opinion, despite spawning two sequels and still

being available to buy today courtesy of the original developers, Vulcan Software. At least I *think* they're independent games. Bonus point for eco-friendliness. ;)



*Valhalla and the Fortress of Eve*



*Valhalla: Before the War*

Regardless, Valhalla is memorable for *two* reasons; its unusual perspective and the implementation of over 1000 lines of spoken dialogue, making it purportedly the first speech-driven Amiga adventure game. Certainly where *floppy*-based varieties are concerned anyway. Use of digitised speech in video games per se actually dates back to 1980, Taito's Space Invaders clone, Stratavox, leading the charge.



"Of course, it would be nothing but the opposite of a Don Bluth game if it didn't have gameplay. Luckily it does, in bucket loads."

### **Amiga Action (94%, July 1994)**

That takes some unpicking. Isn't this at least one double negative too far? Don Bluth was behind such games as Dragon's Lair and Space Ace. Notorious for their exquisite presentation, not so much their non-existent gameplay.

Vulcan marketed Valhalla as an adventure game, though it actually has more in common with top-down, dungeon-crawling RPGs in that the emphasis is on exploration of vast playfields and solving access conundrums, rather than interaction and conversation.



Demonstrating more common sense and forethought than many developers, Vulcan methodically split Valhalla's data across its six floppy disks to ensure that the player would only need to swap them upon commencing each of the four maps. Disks 1 and 2 contain everything except the speech files, and these are preloaded from the outset. If it hadn't been for all the talkiness you wouldn't need to switch disks at all once booted.

It's also possible to save our progress whenever we like with no waypoint gimmickry provisos. Whichever disk is currently inserted will do as storage.

"Also contained in the package was a black and white photo looking like something out of Top Gun, with the

programmer and designer of Valhalla respectively representing the parts of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman."

### **The One (81%, June 1994)**

Huh? Nicole Kidman wasn't in Top Gun. She's not going to be involved with the sequel either. Tom and Nicole had both starred in Days of Thunder and Far and Away together by this stage though.



What seems at first glance like a complicated RPG, isn't at all, largely thanks to the idiot-proof control interface. This consists of just three options; look, use, take/drop. That's all that's necessary to achieve everything required, quickly dispelling any presumptions as to Valhalla's barriers to entry. Fantastic unless you're a battle-hardened XP power-leveller. Then it likely all seems extremely rudimentary.

"... possibly the most instantly captivating game to ever come into the Amiga Action office/shed." - **Amiga Action (94%, July 1994)**

In an effort to make our protagonist more engaging, he spends much of the time craning his neck upwards comically at the player, who presumably towers above, peering into his macrocosm like a dice-rolling board game roleplayer. Point

being that only seeing the top of his head might otherwise have left us feeling somewhat detached.

Endearing little chap he is too (?), what with his chirpy chipmunk voice and whimpering appeals to our empathy. I recall being impressed back then as a clueless kid. These days I could pull off the same effect by increasing the pitch of a recorded audio sample using Audacity or a similar editor.



"Seeing as how he looks remarkably like a certain 'spoilt' character from Viz, and he speaks in an annoyingly pre-pubescent squeak, I found his boasts of maturity to be a tad misleading."

**Amiga Power (19%, July 1994)**





Whilst our starring hero is duty-bound to fulfil this treacherous, daring mission, Mr Noname is forever issuing status updates regarding his current degree of trembling trepidation. Yes, we know you're scared, we got the message after the twenty-seventh repetition!

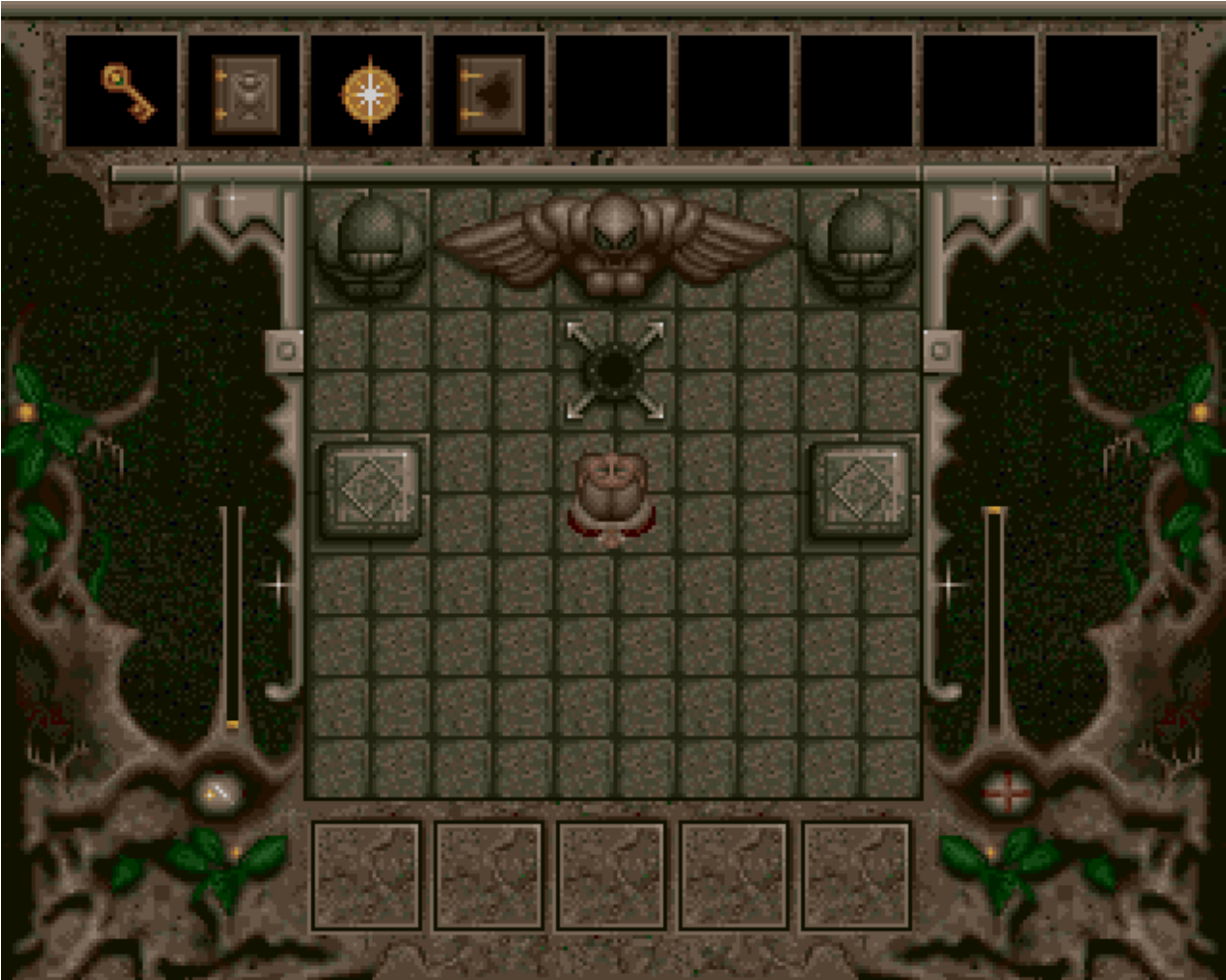
Doesn't exactly inspire confidence, does it? And it's not even as if there's *that* much to be scared *of*. We can plod about for miles throughout the barren, echoing fortress without encountering so much as another living soul. We're made acutely aware of this thanks to thingy's ironically authoritative, reverberating foot-stomps. He sounds like ED-209 out for a stroll in a space station, carrying an elephant.

Apparently, Thingy later tones down his whimpering as he grows in self-confidence, which is a nice touch. Character development in such simplistic games was a rare commodity back then.

Other sound effects reverberate with a metallic, authoritative boom reminiscent of those employed in Gods. All very dramatic and atmospheric.

"Valhalla is well worth a look, and if you're planning on buying it, be prepared for a few late nights." - **The One (81%, June 1994)**

Belying his supposed youthfulness, our hero waddles uncomfortably in honour of his meticulously-sculptured pot-belly, hands clasped ponderously behind his back like Prince Charles. Maybe there's a joke in there somewhere. As if we weren't confused enough, the back of the box depicts our Little Lord Fauntleroy wannabe with grey hair.



Oh yeah, *plot*. We play as the otherwise unnamed Prince of Valhalla, son of King Garamond, nephew to the eponymous Lord of Infinity. Pops is a top bloke by all accounts and is making a great job of being king.

Well, that's not likely to last then, is it? His younger brother, Infinity, bursting with jealous naughtiness, murders Garamond, usurping his coveted throne to fulfill his evil villain quota. To maintain the new status quo, Infinity intends to also slay Garamond's son, only his diabolical scheme is stymied when the bishop orchestrates Thingy's escape and long-term exile.

As soon as the prince comes of age he vows to return to Valhalla to avenge his father's death, reclaiming the throne

on behalf of the good guys. And here's where *we* enter the equation; as Thingy is a dysfunctional coward, he needs our guidance to locate and assassinate the illegitimate king, thereby restoring peace, tranquillity and that lovely, warm fuzziness that happy endings engender.

Attempt to cast your mind back to the first fully-voiced Amiga adventure game and you might hit upon Simon the Sorcerer for the CD32. You may well be right; both Simon the Sorcerer and Valhalla were released in July 1994. Although Simon *did* have the distinct advantage of being delivered on a 640mb capacity CD-ROM. It's not exactly cheating, just embracing the latest technological advancements.

Four years earlier a cracked version of Operation Stealth allowed you to *listen* to the entire saga. The caveat is that it engages your Amiga's ability to announce text using the system's built-in speech synthesis module. It ain't pretty! Everything sounds like Stephen Hawking broadcasting from the moon via a couple of tin cans and a bit of dissolving silly string. Also, none of the audio is stored on disk, instead, it's generated on the fly.

Whether or not Valhalla even counts as a point and click adventure game is another matter entirely. It's barely in the same genre, and our prince doesn't really converse with the inhabitants of his fantasyland environment, he merely makes exclamations to describe the outcome of his actions. Sometimes while in the vicinity of other sentient entities. Extremely repetitive and largely redundant exclamations. So much so you'll soon wish that Valhalla was a traditional, text-based speech bubble affair. It's no substitute for the immersive, delicately constructed theatre nurtured by Monkey Island et al.

Still, the staggering feat of cramming all of this onto a meagre six floppy disks must be acknowledged. Produced by

a team of gaming newbies in just twelve weeks using AMOS and an Amiga 500, the finished article is a wonder to behold.

According to The One magazine, an "all-singing all-dancing" CD32 release featuring "a full musical score and CD-quality speech" was proposed, though ultimately failed to materialise. It would only have diminished the achievement, truth be told.

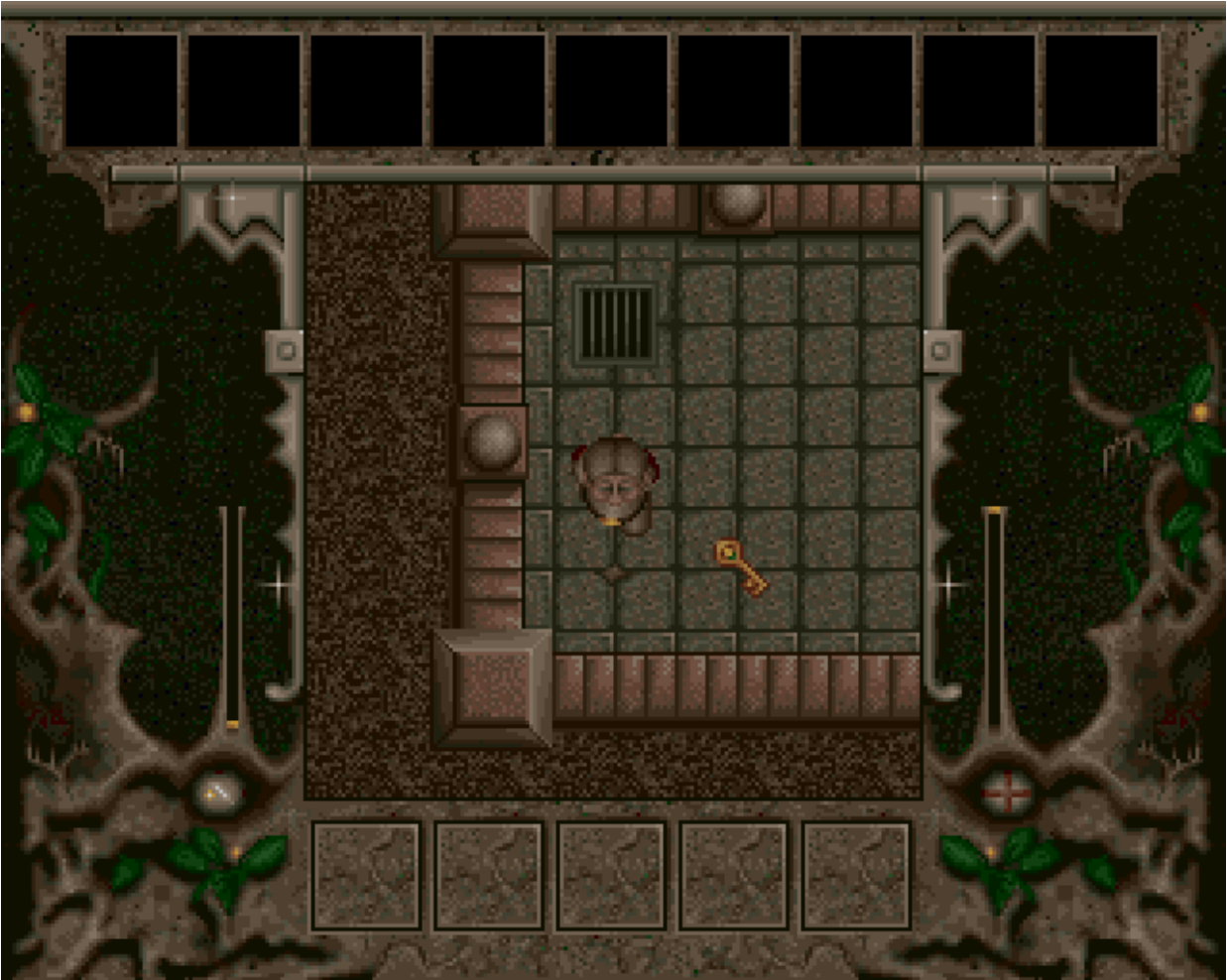
Similarly impressive that the prologue is entirely spoken and comprises a more narrative structure than the in-game vocal 'tool tips', whereas normally you might have to scan over a rolling scroll to trace your motivation. Several critics at the time of the game's initial assessment complained that there's no way to skip this, although if they'd read the manual properly they'd know that you only have to hold down the fire button.

Also fully voiced is the epilogue following Thingy's finale showdown; a major enhancement over the cursory line of congratulatory text with which we're typically fobbed off.

"That said, the end sequence is one of the most tear-jerkingly, heart-rending pieces of animation ever seen in a game. But you'll have to get there yourself if you want to know what happens."

### **CU Amiga (90%, July 1994)**

Don't set your hopes quite *that* high! You'll be lucky to see it firsthand mind you, the expert's longplay runtime extending well over three hours. I certainly wouldn't have the patience to ever accomplish this. Ten minutes in, the novelty factor a distant memory, there's little left to keep you plugging away until the bitter, vengeful end.



"The most innovative adventure since Monkey Island." -  
**CU Amiga (90%, July 1994)**

Initial critical appraisals fluctuated wildly, ranging from dismal to 'surely money changed hands there'. Amiga Action's 94% assessment was the most suspect among them, then they *were* selected to host a custom-made pre-release demo starring the magazine staff themselves. How could they possibly offer an honest review after embracing that kind of hospitality? Plus, anyone who disagrees with me *must* be a lying fraudster.

"So what is all of this got to do with gun control? Well, the thing is that I love guns. I admire their flawlessly functional lines, their engineering and their power, and if

someone stuffed a Browning Hi-Power in my hand right now after I have played this all day, there is a good chance I would go out and do very Bad Things with it. I really am that wound up."

"No matter how much you like adventures, no matter how intrigued you are by a talking game, no matter how much money you have got, do not waste any of it on this. it looks great, but so what? It is boring."

### **Amiga Power (July 1994)**

Amiga Power's 19% score sounds more credible. They quickly recognised that Valhalla is a deadly dull one-trick pony with nothing more up its sleeve beyond the box cover claim to fame.

Oh well, top marks for experimenting with an unconventionally wacky, fresh perspective. You've got to admire Vulcan for having the courage to stand by their wimpy leading boy, hamstrung with his 'help me mummy' dependence and not so intrepid approach to fratricidal retribution.